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ABSTRACT

Policies exist in every aspect of people's lives from the landlord's policy on pets to the government's policy on literacy. As such, policy becomes the ideal place to begin to examine the articulation of distance education because policy inevitably marks the site where different kinds of political discourses and social practices intersect. By examining the rhetoric of distance education policy, this paper traces the questions of power that lie behind the rules and norms of distance learning within higher education. Noting that in the 1980s public funding for higher education began to decrease, the paper states that shifting notions of the role of higher education form the contextual stage for the re-entry of distance education. With the increasing use of computer technology, distance education emerges in the 1990s as the means for improving access to higher education while containing the cost. The paper cites Indiana's creation of a policy for delivering degree programs through distance education technology; the policy's first purpose is to "ensure that distance learners have access to the same quality of instruction available on campus," while another purpose is to "use taxpayer dollars efficiently." The paper finds that the rhetoric of the policy translated institutions and faculty into producers, students into consumers and markets, and higher education into an instructional marketplace. It also states that research literature suggests that the use of computer technology in composition increases rather than reduces the interaction between students and between students and faculty. It concludes that if educators want to play a role in how they are constructed as subjects within distance education, they will need to begin with policy. Contains 24 references. (NKA)

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Compromising Composition: Articulating Quality and Practice in Distance Education Policy.

By Teena A.M. Carnegie

(Presented at the 51st annual Conference on College Composition and Communication: April 12, 2000)

When examining distance education, why begin with policy? How many academics outside of committee meetings actually read and respond to policies. Generally, we turn to policies only when we need to apply them as in the case of sexual harassment, racism, or plagiarism. Policies are invisible to us most of the time, but they exist in every aspect of our lives from the landlord's policy on pets to the government's policy on literacy. As such, policy becomes the ideal place to begin if we want to examine the articulation of distance education because policy inevitably marks the site where different kinds of political discourses and social practices intersect. In other words, policy represents what Stuart Hall would refer to as "a systematic practice of regulation, of rule and norm, of normalization, within society" (93). Behind the facade of unity offered by policy, we can find the differences and the contradictions that make up a play for power. By examining the rhetoric of distance education policy, this presentation seeks to trace the questions of power that lie behind the rules and norms of distance learning within higher education.

Policies structure the institutional approaches to distance education because universities and colleges must comply with accrediting and delivery policies to implement a degree-granting program and to gain access to government funding. Accreditation, the official sanctioning of a degree program, is not just a process of

assuring "quality" of education. Although "quality" is often the declared purpose, a closer look at accreditation policies reveals another story (and contradicting notions of quality). Through policy, public officials determine the role that education is deemed to play in society and its relationship to the public. The rhetoric of policy determines the rights that will be granted to the participants. For example, a liberal rhetoric emphasizes the term "access," and policy based on this rhetoric suggests that all citizens have a right to education despite economic status, race, gender, and physical abilities. James Mingle points out that when access (within this liberal rhetoric) is defined as a universal concept: "Participation in some form of postsecondary education is an expectation for all our citizens throughout their adult life" (*Faculty* 5). As marginalized groups have moved to claim access, however, the cost of public education increases. "Cost" quickly becomes the term emphasized as a more conservative, capitalist rhetoric takes over. In this rhetoric, access is not a question of rights but affordability.

Quality, access, and cost form the key terms in the rhetoric of distance education policy. The terms mark the site of connection between differing discourses and practices. The terms appear to be inextricably linked in the "chain of equivalence" that fixes the meaning of distance education as we know it today. To provide a clear picture of how distance education is being articulated, we must step outside of the term and understand what it means in reference to higher education.

According to a report by the Institute for Higher Education Policy, early political discourse, such as that of Thomas Jefferson, emphasized the public and democratic role of higher education (*Reaping* 7). Education enabled the understanding, maintaining, and exercising of one's rights as a citizen. In the 1960s and 1970s, higher education was still

concerned with individual growth and opportunity, but access was the defining term. By the 1980s, the "collision with demography" (*Faculty*, 5) became apparent. Public funding for higher education began to decrease causing a substantial change in notions of access and quality (*Tuition* 13). With the decrease in public funding, tuition fees increased. For students, this often represented a 500% increase in tuition and fees.

Access, in this context, becomes a question of affordability and blame. Today, research indicates that the cost of higher education is one of the top concerns of parents (above quality of public schools, health care, and the fear that their children will be victims of crime) (*Tuition* 13). And parents often view this increased cost as a direct result of "high-priced faculty" (*Tuition* 13). Public policymakers relate the increased cost to the inability of institutions of higher education to set appropriate spending priorities. As a survey by the Education Commission of the States' (ECS) reveals, policymakers believe "higher education does not spend its money wisely, and that tuition increases could be avoided if colleges realigned their spending with those areas the public most cares about, particularly undergraduate education and job preparation:" (*Tuition* 13)

Institutions of higher education, however, did not respond to the decrease in public funding in the 1980s by simply increasing tuition. Universities and colleges adapted other strategies in an attempt to maintain their revenue base. They not only increased efforts for fundraising from the philanthropic sector (*Tuition* 14), but also changed their appeal to public funding sources. As James Mingle points out the "elixir of the 1980s" was a notion of quality funding *(Political* 8). Higher education institutions sought to replace "categorical funding," a funding based on enrollment, with quality funding, arguing that in the face of declining enrollments they needed to maintain the

quality of education and for that more funding was required. But in accepting this notion of funding, institutions had to accept how the state defined quality, and the state did not define quality in terms of individual rights to education or in terms of producing citizens dedicated to democracy. The state, according to Mingle, defined quality in very concrete terms: basic job skills, job training, and applied research. According to this definition, "a quality institution then is one that produces quick and substantial returns to the state on its investment" (Mingle, *Political* 10).

These shifting notions of the role of higher education form the contextual stage for the re-entry of distance education. With the increasing use of computer technology, distance education emerges in the 1990s as the means for improving access to higher education while containing the cost. In discussing the plans to develop a Virtual University in the western states, for example, Carol Twigg notes that increased enrollment demands have been accompanied by decreasing state revenues leading many political leaders to see distance education and the technology it entails as a "potential silver bullet" (Twigg 28).

Distance education is supposed to provide higher education to more people for less money. But a central part of this equation is the need to maintain the quality of higher education. The concern for quality is particularly important given the history of distance education in the US. As David Noble suggests, "access" has always been a key term in the rhetoric of distance education but it appears to relate negatively to "quality." According to Noble, a similar rhetoric of access prevailed during the 1920s when the correspondence movement in education was being toted as the wave of the future. But in practice, increased "access" led to increased exploitation and fraud. As a result, the

quality of distance education became highly questionable. By the 1950s, the government was warning US GIs to stay away from correspondence courses, and many of the major universities were dropping out of the correspondence business (*Online Education*).

As distance education regained its respectability, policies play a greater and greater role in determining the standards that will govern the implementation of distance education. States play a central role in the standardization process, for states have a vested interest in the benefits that education produces (despite their disinclination to increase funding to higher educational institutes). For example, a report on the benefits of higher education outlines the public economic benefits accrued from individuals with a post-secondary education. These benefits include increased tax revenues, greater productivity, increased consumption, increased workforce flexibility and decreased reliance on government financial support (*Reaping* 14). Not surprisingly, state policymakers couch distance education and the question of access and quality in economic terms, what I call the rhetoric of the market place.

The Indiana Commission For Higher Education, for example, created a policy for delivering degree programs through distance education technology in march 1998. The first purpose of the policy is to "ensure that distance learners have access to the same quality of instruction available on campus" (1). Its third purpose is to "use taxpayer dollars efficiently" (1). The policy closely ties technology to cost effectiveness. And it claims that technology has decreased, if not eliminated the "difference between how a faculty member teaches a course for on-campus delivery and how one teaches for off-campus delivery" suggesting, in the process, that quality is not sacrificed to technology in distance education. According to the preamble, however, technology has altered the

environment for both, "producers and consumers of instruction." How has the environment changed? According to the policy, "the instructional marketplace is far more competitive [and] … Indiana institutions have the capability for reaching vast new student markets" (1)

The rhetoric of the policy translates institutions and faculty into producers, students into consumers and markets, and higher education into an instructional marketplace. The language of the marketplace increases in a commissioned report produced after the Indiana Policy (April 1998). This consultant's report was commissioned by the State of Indiana to assist it "with the areas of technology and distance education" (Bates). Although the report is "for information only," one assumes that it will guide policymakers future decisions. One of the report's primary concerns is "market responsiveness." The proposed roles to be assumed by the statewide coordinating boards include, "enabler, funder, and broker of partnerships", "informer and protector of consumer" and "strategic investor on behalf of the state and its under served customers" (Consultant's Report). The main focus of the report's recommendations is to present a strategy for state investment in distance education. Both the rhetoric of the consultant's report and the state policy articulate higher education according to particular economic and social interests. In seeking to meet the demands of the marketplace, the state defines quality as maintaining the same effects (on-campus education) for more people at less cost. In the process, the state policy articulates specific identities (producers, consumers) and suggests practices (selling and marketing) in order to produce specific results (implementation of technology to lower costs).

The state policy, however, does not determine accreditation. Instead, it follows the guidelines established by the six non-governmental accrediting bodies including, as one example, the North Central Association. The rhetoric of accreditation policy is particularly potent in the articulation of distance education because it exploits "quality" so effectively. It does this by never actually defining the term. The term "quality" within these accreditation policies functions as a confused notion. The term, quality, remains abstract and ambiguous. It can easily shift from one position to another: Faculty can use the term to refer to the quantity of student/faculty interaction; students can use it to refer to increased opportunities, and policymakers can use it to refer to economic benefits. As Chaim Perelman notes confused notions are understood and interpreted in accordance with the users own values (134). The ambiguity of a confused notion produces the appearance of unity despite the differences it represents. The term quality, for example, articulates the different visions of education in such a way that their antagonism is neutralized: no one argues that quality is bad or undesirable for higher education.

The process of how quality is defined in distance education is exemplified through the *Balancing Quality and Access* report produced by the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education. According to Sally M. Johnstone, the main focus of the project from which the report was produced became the question of quality: "what quality means and how it can be addressed" (2). A set of principles of good practice constituted the researchers' answer to these questions. The principles were designed to be used as a tool for assessing the quality of distance education programs. The principles, however, constitute a double articulation in that the practice and structure of quality shape each other: i.e., to achieve quality, new technology, which is changing notions of

access and education, must be incorporated into the existing higher education system; the practices necessary to incorporate technology into the present educational system become the principles for determining quality; institutions which meet these principles "achieve a kind of 'seal of approval'" (Johnstone 41). They maintain their status as quality degree granting institutions and, as a result, gain access to government funding and attract new students. Ironically, the report also concedes that it is not possible to control or regulate programs distributed via the internet. The report then places responsibility for assessing quality with the student: "Empowering the learner is, finally, the only real way to ensure that higher education programs delivered via technology are of high quality. In a non-regulated environment, students must ask the right questions and make sure they get satisfactory answers" (Johnstone 7). In this case, the principles become a limited form of consumer protection – a buyer beware clause.

Accreditation policies are represented as means for evaluation. They measure quality, but inevitably they also determine practice. The NCA Guidelines for Distance Education, for example, outline five areas of practice: curriculum and instruction, evaluation and assessment, library and learning resources, student services, and facilities and finance (these are based on the Principles of Good Practice set out by WICHE). Each of these areas contains a set of requirements that must be met for an institution to be accredited (deemed to provide quality education). The first principle under curriculum and instruction (for distance education) defines one attribute of quality as follows: "Programs provide for timely and appropriate interaction between students and faculty, and among students" (http://www.ncacihe.org). As we can see, however, the principles

are themselves ambiguous and open to interpretation. What, for example, constitutes timely and appropriate interaction?

To understand this articulation of quality, we must first look at possible effects. Scott Wright describes one effect when he documents the case of Gail Spears, a student at Mott Community College in Flint Mich, who graduated without ever setting foot on campus. According to Wright, she earned 70 credits for a business degree by "watching televised courses, sending homework assignments via fax and e-mail, and taking monitored tests at her work place" (9). If she never met her instructors or other classmates face-to-face does this constitute timely and appropriate interaction? Is contact via e-mail and fax enough? David R. Springett suggests that it may be. He argues that education is "no longer come sit at my feet and I will extol to you all the knowledge you need. It's come look at the computer screen" (Wright 10). Question of effective pedagogical practices are clearly not a part of this discourse. In describing how high cost technology can be cost effective for higher education, Charles Karelis offers another possible effect. He argues that the investment in technology can be high up front, but technology allows the institution to increase enrollment without having to pay an additional person to teach the course: the higher the enrollment the lower the per student cost (20). Such a scenario clearly does not allow for substantial student/faculty interaction, yet Karelis claims that research literature shows that there is "no sacrifice in quality" (22).

Larry Gold of the American Federation of Teachers argues that the research literature is inconclusive on whether or not distance education can maintain levels of quality. For him the level of interaction is a serious factor:

> We also found research indicating that distance learning students under some circumstances can do as well on a test as students who took the same course on campus.... it certainly doesn't tell us if distance learning can offer enough interchange with faculty and peers to give students the depth of understanding they need to take their place among other college graduates and to function effectively as knowledge workers over the long haul (Should 48)

Gold suggests that interaction levels in distance education may be too low to support "quality" education. In a study conducted for the Institute for Higher Education Policy, research indicates that 40 percent of students "reported missing the face-to-face interactions" and 25 percent "missed group dynamics" (What's the Difference 15). Michael Berube also argues against the model suggested by Karelis noting that it is impossible for faculty to read and grade papers, counsel and advise students, and write letters of recommendation if they are teaching thousands of students via technology (Berube, 36). Berube argues for an "inefficient" model that maintains a high level of personal and individual contact with students. He views this as the most valuable and educational aspect of higher education (35).

Other effects of this principle of practice are possible within distance education. Research literature suggests that the use of computer technology in composition including email, listservs, MOOs, and chat spaces increases rather than reduces the interaction between students and between students and faculty. As Richard Griggs notes, "Computers are neither human nor humane--teachers are ...Teachers inspire, stimulate and challenge their students. Computer technology may enrich teaching but it clearly

cannot replace it. If it does, we as a society will have committed educational suicide" (Murray). The political nature of distance education lies in its potential to realign relations of power within higher education. The struggle to articulate distance education has produced a debate in which technology is seen on one hand as impersonal: it is used to reach large numbers of students while eliminating faculty and reducing personal interaction which is supposedly at the center of a traditional liberal education. On the other hand, technology is seen as the savior of higher education: it allows for increased access, stimulates interest, enhances learning, and eventually reduces cost.

What is being played out in this debate, however, is less a question of appropriate practice, but more a question of ideology. Higher education is being re-articulation through the language of the marketplace. And nowhere is this more prevalent than in distance education. This re-articulation is reshaping our notion of education moving it away from a liberal, traditional ideology that defines education as the development of better more ethical individuals and as a right of every citizen to a definition of education in terms of its economic functions with access being a factor of cost. In this re-articulation, a dramatic displacement of identities takes place. In the rhetoric of the marketplace, faculty becomes a cost factor (a very expensive one). As noted earlier, the belief that the cost of higher education is due to "faculty cost" is still part of the public's perception.

Technology is often seen as cost effective because it reduces faculty cost. The language of accreditation policies, such as that produced by the NCA, contribute to this construction of faculty identity by representing faculty as objects. A closer examination of the NCA Guidelines, for example, reveals four references to faculty within the

nineteen listed guidelines. In the NCA guidelines the faculty never take a subject position. Only the institution is articulated as subject. For example, one of the most significant guidelines stipulates that the responsibility for ensuring the quality of programs lies with the faculty: "The institution's faculty assumes responsibility for and exercises oversight over distance education, ensuring rigor of programs and the quality of instruction." Although this statement appears to assign a substantial role to faculty, the form of the statement constructs the faculty as a possession of the institution. As an object or possession, however, the faculty exercises very little power. The other guidelines that appear to offer faculty some benefits also rely on vague undefined terms (e.g. clear, appropriate) that offer few if any guarantees of recognition or valuation.

Faculty such as Linda Wolcott argue that distance education is more labor intensive than traditional instruction and that faculty need to be compensated and rewarded more for this extra effort. Ironically, Wolcott suggests that if distance education is given priority by institutions and this priority is recognized in the policies of the institution then those who teach it will also acquire greater value. This assumes that the quality of faculty will be measured differently (i.e. teaching valued more than research) in a distance education model. As suggested, however, the language of distance education constructs quality as practice and those practices are largely concerned with cost effectiveness not with how to measure the faculty's abilities. The re-articulation of higher education being carried out in the policies of distance education is not concerned with the empowerment of faculty, but with distribution and markets: more for less. In this construction, faculty become a commodity and those who are capable of attracting

the most students will be most valued, as this opening from the Communication News article "Time to put some teachers out of a job" suggests:

> Imagine the power of having Bill Cosby lecture to kids across the country and around the world on good nutrition. Not just once or twice a year on a TV special, but in school, two to three times a week on a regular basis. What boy wouldn't listen to Meg Ryan talk about English, math, anything? There'd be a lot fewer cut classes if Robin Williams were the regular first period lecturer on history. ...There is not reason why the lecturers have to be entertainment celebrities. The quality of education in rural areas and inner cities would jump markedly if teachers with world-class credentials both in teaching ability and subject knowledge were present in those schools. It's obvious the answer is distance education. ... Our children, our future, deserve the best our educational and technological capabilities have to offer. Bring on the best and can the rest. (Harler 4)

Clearly, policies, in and of themselves, offer us no guarantees that we will be valued or that education will be interactive and humane. It is how policies articulate practice and organize "social, institutional, technical, economic and political forces" into unities that can either empower or disempower us (Slack 124). The articulation of higher education is changing. Each articulation positions us differently, but they are not fixed or eternal. The discourse of distance education is being newly formed and is not yet normalized: we can still articulate distance education differently. But we must be cautious in the rhetoric we use. The marketplace rhetoric is fast becoming a line of tendential force. It places faculty and students into positions in which they will possess

little control or power. To be a producer of education may offer some power, but it devalues faculty in other ways. What for example will constitute top quality faculty: those with credentials or those with selling power. Consumers may have some power in determining quality through the buying choices they make, but their choices may be limited because they may not have access to unaffordable goods. If we want to play a role in how we are constructed as subjects within distance education, we will need to begin with policy.

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